

inside his brain, but all he could come up with was, "Grapefruit." The sentence had broken up into separate words that refused to string themselves together again.

Back in the kitchen, Dolores sliced a new grapefruit, an equatorial slice this time. She didn't bother Bill the cook. He was hungover and as grouchy as a sleepy bear. A request for a re-order might just result in a homicide.

Dolores brought out the new fruit and set it down in front of Clete. "There you go," she said. "We're talkin' equatorial this time." To make up for the initial mistake, and to ensure herself a good tip, she had made the cut a bit higher than the equator, giving Clete a good two-thirds of the globe. Clete grinned and nodded at her, and Ellis reached across the table and lifted the grapefruit out of its bowl for an inspection. "Equator's down here," he said, pointing to an imaginary line in the middle of the fruit. "This looks more like maybe the thirty-fifth parallel, sweetie. Don't you know nothin' about geometry?"

#### WALKIN'

Clete's recovery was going so well — he had graduated from walker to quad-cane to regular cane — that Ellis decided to take him out to the mall to buy him some walking shoes. They found a nice pair on sale at Sears for \$14.99, bought them, and went out to grab a couple of cups of gourmet coffee from the Exotic Coffee Stop. Four incredibly expensive cookies from Mrs. Chips rounded out the repast, and Ellis found them a spot on the edge of the brick planter box and he and Clete sat and munched and sipped and watched the pretty ladies walk by.

Clete's bad foot began to drag a bit on the way back to the car, but he made it, no sweat. He did so well that at times he eschewed the aid of the cane, lifting it and grasping it at mid-point to carry it at his side in the horizontal position. He would have twirled it like a baton had he known how.

They ran into Corinne, the lady who ran the snack bar down at the Loma Alta Lanes, out in the parking lot. She was climbing out of the driver's seat of her Datsun when Ellis slid between his car and hers and began to talk some shit to her. He had had the hots for her for what seemed like forever. She wasn't interested but she enjoyed the game; she smiled and laughed and let Ellis make a fool of himself, winking at Clete over the roof of her car. Ellis' suave, man-of-the-world facade blinked off when he leaned his hand against his sun-broiled fender. The ozone-depleted atmosphere had allowed enough solar radiation



through to heat the metal up to steak-frying temperature. Ellis' hand hit, sizzled, and jumped up in the air without Ellis having to engage his brain in the situation at all — pure reflex taking control. But the pain was just a blink behind the reflex, and Ellis shouted, "AIEE, SHIT!" and overreacted, pulling his arm back so hard that his elbow took out the passenger window of Corinne's car. Then he danced out from between the two cars waving his smoking hand and howling like a coyote.

Then Clete and Corinne got the giggles, Corinne looking over the roof of her car to say, "Stop it Clete. It's not funny," without convincing Clete or herself. Clete tried to stop and almost succeeded, but Ellis, out dancing in the middle of the lane, got hit by a passing car and fell face-first on its hood, and the slice of belly that grinned out from the space between the bottom of his t-shirt and the top of his trousers kissed that hot metal and sizzled like an egg on a griddle. Then the car's driver slammed on the brakes and dumped Ellis. He yowled and jumped up and turned and ran for the mall, for, presumably, the cool, clear fountain outside of Ed Nguyen's Oriental Fast Food Emporium, hiking his shirt up over his belly to keep it out of contact with the blisters that were sprouting on his skin.

Clete and Corinne's dual case of the giggles exploded into uncontrollable gales of laughter, and that caused a problem for Corinne. She had just finished a Diet Pepsi in her car, and her bladder was full to bursting. She stopped laughing for just long enough to gasp, "Oh, God," and then she staggered out from between the cars, her thighs clamped together, her shins spread apart, one hand pressed over her laughter-contorted face, the other burrowed deep into her crotch to catch the first of the dribbles of that so inevitable flow. And Clete, having laughed himself completely out of breath, completely senseless, forgot about the very event that had ignited his mirth, and he lay his forehead down on the shiny roof of Ellis' Oldsmobile. But not for long.

## PORK CHOPS

Ellis drove east on Highway 76, rolling through the hills planted with strawberries, past the pungent dairy farms, and through Old Man Yoshimura's blooming orange orchard. He turned left in the little farm town of Bonsai and followed a winding, potholed, two-lane road into the foothills, out to an ancient grove of oak trees. He pulled off the road and parked under one of those old oaks and said, "Looks like a good spot, don't it, Clete?"